

QUALITY IN HEALTH CARE

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the current distribution of resources. Facing choices in health care investment is unavoidable although the practical reality of achieving consensus on a common set of principles to guide decision making and a method for producing a set of priorities has been difficult at every level and wherever it has been tried. *Priority Setting: The Health Care Debate* summarises much of the current debate and practical experience about setting priorities in health care both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. The technical approach of the Oregon experiment is contrasted with the participative approach used by the New Zealanders when establishing their "core services". The book is useful in documenting in detail recent case histories and models mostly around the notions of equity, efficiency, and lay participation. No new ideas are raised, however, and the conclusion of the book — in a chapter entitled *A way ahead* — is very much a synthesis of what has gone before. For a book which takes much of its methodological and philosophical approach from economics it is rather single minded. The emphasis is on the role of explicit decision making processes for setting priorities in the modern NHS. The authors spend time examining some of the historical perspective which may help to

explain why we are where we are in healthcare policy. Yet healthcare priorities cannot be set free of political interference and it could be argued that democracy is the appropriate means of setting priorities, with national political responsibility for the end result the only meaningful way to succeed in achieving lay participation and public accountability. The book also does not examine the efficiency or equity of all 111 health authorities pursuing their own priorities. It is disappointing in vision although it will be helpful to purchasers - embarking on the perilous route of rationing - to learn from others.

ALISON FRATER

*Assistant Director of Public Health,
West Hertfordshire Health Authority*

DIARY

24-26 April 1997

Paris, France: Second European Forum on Quality Improvement in Health Care. The forum will consist of one day teaching

courses, invited presentations, posters, and presentations selected from submissions and a scientific session. For more information contact: BMA, Conference Unit, PO Box 295, London, WC1H 9TE. Tel: +44 (0) 171 383 6478 Fax: +44 (0) 171 383 6869

19 February 1997

Peterborough, England: Conference audit of hip fractures. Further information from Mr M J Parker, Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, Peterborough District Hospital, Thorpe Road, Peterborough PE3 6DA, UK (tel 1733 874515; fax 1733 874001).

31 August - 5 September 1997

Maastricht, The Netherlands. International summer school on quality improvement in general practice is organised jointly by the Centre for Quality of Care Research University of Nijmegen and Maastricht University and the Wonca European Working Party on Quality in Family Practice (EQUIP). Further information from: PO Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands. Tel 31-43-3882334 / 3882311; Fax 31-43-3619344; Email Karin-vaessen@HAG.unimaas.NL

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